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Journalists, diplomats, and spies — there are some parallels

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SOME comments on the Daniloff case, spies, journalists, summit II, and Soviet-American relations.

But first, full disclosure: Your obedient servant has in the distant past talked world affairs with a CIA agent nicknamed, for some unremembered reason, the Chocolate Banana. I have also, in more recent years, dined and talked about the world with both KGB and CIA agents and officials: among the former, the ranking KGB agent in Washington; among the latter, two directors, two deputy directors, and the Africa department chief of the CIA. I neither received nor gave away any secrets, was not even remotely an agent. The lunches were good. They added to my store of information, some of it not before seen in print.

These facts bear mention because it should be remembered that the professions of journalism, diplomacy, and spying run parallel a good deal of the time and occasionally intersect. If Nicholas Daniloff was doing his job well (and he was), he undoubtedly encountered both CIA and KGB agents during 5½ years in Moscow. Some he may have suspected as such; some he may not. But such contact doesn't mean he was an agent himself. For reasons detailed below, there is something approaching 100 percent certainty that he was not.

All three professions are in the business of ferreting out information. All three try to discover the most knowledgeable, shrewd, and dispassionate experts on what is going on in a competitive world and its subdivisions. All three then report their findings. There, differences emerge. Journalists expose their findings (and any mistakes) to readers several times a week. Diplomats needn't worry about disclosure except when a white paper is published a decade or two later. Spies seldom see their reports (and mistakes) in public print.

Of the three careers, two (diplomacy and espionage) sometimes occupy the same body.

To be more precise, spies sometimes have diplomatic cover and work out of embassies. Some American agents used to adopt cover as newspaper correspondents (and did so until the early 1970s). And some American journalists used to engage in work for The Agency, particularly in the 1950s when the Central Intelligence Agency first emerged from the chrysalis left from the wartime Office of Strategic Services, and a World War II outlook still carried over into the cold-war period.

But those days are long gone. The last serious allegations of US journalists-doubling-as-spies were disclosed in news exposés and congressional hearings in 1976 and '77. Even there, a distinction should be noted: Most of the allegations pointed to an earlier period and often to nonstaff writers (stringers who may have belonged to no one news outfit but sold to many).

Several things probably killed the journalist-spy combination in the US. First, some agents posing as journalists were so clumsy as to make real journalists want to distance themselves from the badly camouflaged replicas. Then, Vietnam eroded the argument for patriotic double duty. Watergate caused journalists questioning politicians' ethics to tighten up their own standards. Correspondents began to pride themselves on rejecting conflicts of interest and paying allegiance only to their own profession and the facts. Then the CIA itself adopted rules forbidding use of journalists as agents. The main bulwark, though, was an almost belligerent attitude that grew up in the journalism trade against such conflicts of interest.

If that chain of events presents a 95 percent certainty that Daniloff operated only for his magazine, President Reagan's categoric declaration to General Secretary Gorbachev that Daniloff was not a spy pushes the certainty toward the 100 percent mark. Presidents have to be very careful about lying on this subject. (They risk their credibility with their superpower opposite number for the rest of their term.) They also have to be careful about telling the truth. (They may endanger policies, summits, or other individual at risk for whom they don't then personally vouch.)

It should be remembered that some officials on both the US and Soviet side would have preferred that President Eisenhower lie to Nikita Khrushchev in May 1960

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after U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers was shot down while doing high-altitude surveillance just before a major summit. By falsely saying he knew nothing about the U-2 operation, the argument went, Eisenhower could have saved face and salvaged his coming summit. He chose to tell the truth.

Mr. Reagan must be presumed to have demanded the truth about Daniloff from CIA director William J. Casey and then decided to guarantee it in his letter to Mr. Gorbachev.

The President is now being attacked by his far right and by some neo-conservatives for having caved in by allowing both Daniloff and accused spy Gennadi Zakharov to be placed in the hands of their respective embassies. The implication from Reagan's detractors is that he is so eager to get summit planning back on track that he has allowed a Soviet spy to be equated with a nonspy taken hostage for the purpose of trading pawns.

Despite vehement public statements that this is not the case — and that both Reagan and Secretary of State George P. Shultz will continue to demand Daniloff's unconditional release — it seems likely that both arrested men will likely be sent home eventually. Zakharov after a trial; Daniloff perhaps after a trial, perhaps without trial.

We should not lose sight of two points.

1. The Daniloff case, a second summit, and Soviet-American relations are only momentarily intertwined. An important principle is at stake in the Daniloff case. But the long-term improvement of Soviet-American relations is of more major importance to many peoples around the world. Summit meetings are only the most dramatic of the many negotiations by which such improvement is grudgingly extracted from competitors who trust each other only sporadically. But summits both cause and leave behind an opening of the way for lesser negotiations to proceed.

2. Gorbachev may be using the Daniloff brouhaha to prove his toughness after having to give ground at, and since, his first summit last November. But he is unlikely to be directly using the affair to scuttle a summit or break off progress already made between the superpowers.

Gorbachev went on vacation Aug. 19 (about a month later than expected). Zakharov was arrested Aug. 22. Daniloff was arrested Aug. 28. We don't know at what point Gorbachev's Politburo colleagues interrupted Gorbachev's vacation to fill him in on the case. But it seems most likely that the KGB followed standard procedures for getting a captured agent back by trading for him. And it is reasonably certain that the collective leadership of the Politburo decided it would not back down and alter this system.

A feeling had grown among Moscow's old guard that Gorbachev had yielded a lot of ground — at the Geneva summit and in various public and private positions on arms control since then. Now it is Reagan who is being accused by his old guard of giving ground. That is the price of both leaders pay for preparing to tango.

On balance, Reagan has yielded less than Gorbachev since they warily began to dance in 1985.

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